

A CATHOLIC MODERNITY?: CHARLES TAYLOR'S MARIANIST AWARD LECTURE.

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This lecture, delivered by the illustrious moral and political philosopher Charles Taylor, has much to offer. One commentator specifically envisions the lecture as a sort of belated concluding chapter to Taylor's widely acclaimed *Sources of the Self*.¹ But there is much that Taylor has written with which this lecture's themes could be meaningfully compared. The lecture is certainly more autobiographical and self-revelatory than the bulk of Taylor's prior work.

In the course of his lecture, Taylor thinks of contemporary intellectual culture as divided among secular humanists, a broadly defined group of neo-Nietzscheans, and the acknowledgers of transcendence. Transcendence here refers to a dimension of the good extending beyond mundane human life. The acknowledgers of transcendence are in turn subdivided into two groups. These are roughly, the party of reaction, presumably indebted to figures such as Edmund Burke, Joseph de Maistre, and Louis Bonald, and the party devoted to expanding liberty and equality.

Taylor worries that the insensitivities and even depredations of those who acknowledge transcendence, along with the contributions toward genuine human liberation made by those rejecting transcendence, will combine to produce a distinctly unfortunate consequence. In particular, we may come to suppose that at least at our historical juncture, we would collectively be better off in entirely rejecting any transcendental perspective and focusing exclusively on human flourishing or fulfillment secularly conceived.

Secular human fulfillment is thought by Taylor to involve centrally the broad project of pushing back the frontiers of suffering and death. Taylor is nevertheless concerned, based largely on some elements of twentieth century history, that serious risks attend a dominant anti-transcendentalist culture. He argues that the denial of transcendence may actually jeopardize the emancipatory project of expanding respect for rights and for human lives.

1. See George Marsden, *Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture*, herein at 83 (referring to Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Harv. U. Press 1989)).

Crucially, Taylor sees a purely secular aspiration to universal human solidarity as dangerously fragile or unstable in its motivations. The secularist may begin by embracing and uplifting the stranger, the distant, the different, the victimized, and the oppressed. But secularist benevolence may turn malign. The all-too-human refractoriness of the objects of secularist benevolence may eventually provoke disappointment and impatience. Taylor does not discuss the extent, if any, to which such disappointment is ever left unacknowledged by secularists. But Taylor emphasizes that secularist disappointment with the objects of secularist benevolence may ultimately manifest itself, perversely, in contempt, aggression, and violence toward those very persons.

Taylor speaks of this exclusively secular emancipatory project as motivated by a sense of one's self-worth and a sense, by extension, of the worth or dignity of other persons. Actually, secular devotion to extending liberty and equality need not be grounded in any sort of introspective or intuitive sense of self-worth. Neither Kant, nor contemporary neo-Kantians such as Barbara Herman, Thomas Hill, Christine Korsgaard, and Allen Wood, need rely on such an introspective sense. Neither, for that matter, do contemporary utilitarians such as Peter Singer. Taylor could, presumably, expand his critique of the secular motivational transformation described above to encompass all such approaches.

More crucially, though, we may wonder whether Taylor's vision of secularism's future does not excessively mirror, in an unduly literal way, the excrescences of the secularist past. The future of secularist motivations and politics may well be far less perverse than Taylor fears. Even if, for the sake of argument, we now try to imagine the future pathologies of secularist politics, we may wind up with a somewhat different vision.

Already, for example, American secular politics has seen a scaling back of aspiration and fervor in various areas, including immigration, welfare policy, inequality of income and wealth, homelessness, capital punishment, and even in universal, genuinely effective public education, all during periods of peace and economic abundance. Do these trends reflect or even anticipate secularist hostility, anger, aggression, and coerciveness toward the disenfranchised? Or are these trends better described in more muted terms, such as increasing indifference, individual or group hedonism, ironism, jadedness, skepticism, cynicism, *Weltschmerz*, or ennui? Such moods may be transient, but some might also be quite stable over the long term, and in that further sense

"secular" as well. The virtue of tolerance can perhaps degenerate into indifferent tolerance of sheer unfairness. The values of pluralism and diversity might perversely come to encompass a plurality of diverse ways of suffering unjustly. When we even now commonly ignore mass starvation or genocidal movements, do we do so out of anything like genuine overt hostility, as opposed to some form of narrow moral focus or of indifference?

None of this is to suggest, of course, that even the more responsible elements of the party of transcendence are incapable of similar, if not worse, irresponsibility. But while our enormous collective wealth and preoccupation with consumption and market-oriented gratification may have marginalized at least some forms of concern for transcendence, these same broadly economic phenomena may also be reducing the moral seriousness with which we address the various social issues referred to above. Of late, some elements of secular liberalism have drifted toward a sort of broad, indifferentialist libertarianism closer to current "right-wing" Chicago-school libertarianism than previous generations of secular liberals would have thought appropriate. The looming problem, then, is not the eventual guillotining of the *sans culottes*, but our fundamental unseriousness toward such persons in a consumptionist society.

The party of transcendence, on the other hand, can and should more unequivocally promote the general pushing back of suffering and death. Any abatement of this effort, for the sake of potentially valuable spiritual experience, is quite unnecessary as long as no critical shortage of suffering and death impends. Rather, suffering and death, whether of humans or of our fellow creatures, should prompt us to choose freely to develop our individual and collective capacities, the better to understand and control the incidence of suffering and death. In this freely chosen developmental process, we manifest our sense of responsibility and exalt our better nature.

This is a matter of some importance. Taylor appreciates that most of those who are unsympathetic with the idea of transcendence are not thus disposed because they have themselves refuted Anselmian or Thomistic deductive arguments for transcendence. Far more importantly, the party of transcendence is morally blameworthy for its own excesses. But more deeply, it is often intuitively felt that there is simply more animal suffering and undeserved human suffering than can be reasonably accounted for on the assumption of a transcendent being as traditionally conceived. Contemporary lack of sympathy with the idea of transcendence is thus, as Taylor notes, based largely on moral

ideas and moral judgments.

The vague sense of gratuitous, unredeemed, unaccountable suffering does seem widespread, and a number of contemporary writers have begun to address these concerns in a philosophically sophisticated way. Names such as Richard Swinburne, Peter van Inwagen, and Stephen Wykstra, come to mind. The partisans of transcendence owe, certainly, the best and most broadly convincing account of why we encounter suffering in the forms and degrees we do.

Part of that account, it seems, should rely on the still rather widely shared sense of the enormous moral and dignitary value of genuine freedom of human choice, and of the human capacity to assume increasing collective responsibility, partly through freely choosing to develop our collective capacities over time in various ways relevant to the incidence and degree of suffering. Surely the value of freely choosing, and being increasingly able, to push back the frontiers of suffering and death will still strike many nontranscendentalists as of greater meaning, dignity, and value than, say, living in a hypothetical alternative world in which we are by nature simply incapable of doing significant harm to one another or to our fellow creatures.

Taylor's lecture is commented upon by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain. Each of these commentaries is thoughtful, and collectively they raise a number of significant issues. Professor Taylor's concluding reflections in turn respond to the commentaries. Among the themes concisely emphasized by Taylor's response is the value of communitarianism, based on the importance of our inescapable interdependency, mutual constitutiveness, complementarity, and the value of solidarity.

R. George Wright[†]

[†] Professor of Law, Indiana University School of Law, Indianapolis, Indiana.